

# Transgressing and Resisting Gender Normativity: Transgender Bodies and Narratives on Stage

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*Do you have any idea what it's like to never know what people are thinking when they look at you?*

*...the comfortable feeling of knowing where our bodies are at all times might not in fact be a very queer feeling.*

(Crawford)

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## I. Introduction

In this essay, I am focusing specifically on transgender bodies and narratives on stage, what they mean, and what they bring to theatre. I specifically use the term “on stage” rather than “in theatre” because I am most interested in the audience/narrative/actor relationship in this work. If I said “in theatre”, there would be several layers of backstage-working relationships to discuss such as actor/director, actor/actor, actor/designer, etc., which could be an entire additional paper in and of itself.

In the tradition of transgender studies, rather than being made an object of study as a trans person, I am seeking to make the world *my* object of study. That is to say, I am seeking to identify the theory of trans scholars within and create knowledge out of lived, personal experiences of my work as a trans actor and theatre maker. The framework with which I am approaching transgender bodies and narratives on stage are languages of intelligibility, representational practices, gender performativity, gender self-determination, shifting, trans embodiment, and trans affect. I specifically address the way in which trans bodies and narratives are largely invisible in theatre - even though they are there - because the language they speak is not legible to mainstream audiences. This clash of mainstream representational practices and trans self-representational practices brings up several questions addressed in this paper such as: Where do these meet? Can they ever meet? On whose terms do they meet? Do we create bridges for them to meet? Who are we performing for? How is gender and transness constructed (or not) in theatre? Who are we trying to be recognized by? How could trans be embodied and affected on stage beyond a fixed identity?

Finally, this paper proposes the ways in which trans artists can counter gender normativity from their own positionality on stage, and in the process, expose the cracks in gender and claim agency while simultaneously opening up the space of theatre. Ultimately, I want to pose the question: beyond the fact that we should just have more trans people on stage to begin with (which is often tokenizing), what functions do a trans body and narrative on stage serve?

## II. Languages of Intelligibility and Trans Visibility on Stage, or the example of cesario

*The 2017 Minnesota Fringe Festival was 11 fast-paced days of uncensored, bold work. For my part, I was involved as an actor, dramaturg, and collaborator in What You Will, an exploration of Twelfth Night through transgender identity. Twelfth Night, the Shakespeare play our company used as the basis for our work, centers on the journey of two twins separated by a shipwreck. In the aftermath, Viola - the twin usually considered a woman - makes the decision to live as a man named Cesario, presumably for safety in this unfamiliar, post-shipwreck land. When I revisited this text before we began rehearsals, I started to have a lot of questions about our assumption that this character, Viola, is cisgender (that is to say, their gender aligns with the one they were assigned at birth). Guided by these questions, I discovered that understanding this person as a woman in disguise – while a legitimate (and the most common) choice – is not an inherent truth of the text, but a lens through which we see this story. From then on, we as collaborators decided to explore the possibility of Cesario being a trans man. Words and phrases in the text started to fall differently on my ear. The play is rife with language around Cesario's identity and honestly, no one in the play can seem to quite pin down where Cesario lies on the spectrum of gender - being referred to as "a fair young man" in one scene and being told that everything about his body "is semblative a woman's part" in the next. And while we could use the various feminine gendered terms to deny Cesario's gender as a man, to me it opened up more questions about the possibilities and complexities of this individual's trans identity that dominant cis narratives tend to erase for the sake of palatability.*

*Yet, while most folks I spoke with were excited by the work being done at Fringe and the adventurous audiences, I was left with...disappointment. Not on every level - I heard feedback from trans folks who saw themselves in our work. One trans guy came up to me and said, "I've never seen myself on stage like that before." A 13-year-old left us a note, writing that they had been questioning their gender for a long time and our show made them feel at peace. But, while playing a trans man on stage, I also found a certain resistance to my body and my gender in the largely cisgender audience. They seemed preoccupied with their ability to "read trans" as clearly as possible in a particular way. One reviewer, in the same comment in which they repeatedly refer to*

*Cesario as "she" said, "More could have been done leading up to the end to give us hints about [Viola wanting to be Cesario]". A mentor even said that we didn't "make enough of a case for Cesario being trans". So, as I was being repeatedly misgendered and singularly interpreted by audiences along with my character, I was left with the question: what's a trans actor to do?*

In "Mutilating Gender", Dean Spade attests that "the favored indication of ["the ability to inhabit and perform 'successfully' one's new gender category"] seems to be the gender attribution of non-trans people." This is normative gender legibility, or the way in which one's "real gender is the one that [non-trans] people can see on you". As such, trans self-representational practices - that is to say ways in which trans people tell stories about themselves - often become filtered through a need to be understood by a mainstream language of gender intelligibility - one that is binary, cisgender-centric, and heteronormative. In Laura Horak's article "Trans on Youtube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality", she addresses the way in which transgender YouTubers document their transitions using hormones in a way that is consumable and understandable to a mainstream audience through the concept of "hormone time". Horak defines hormone time as "linear and teleological, directed toward the end of living full time in the desired gender". In many ways, trans people here are utilizing a language of mainstream intelligibility to discuss their experiences. "Hormone time" makes use of a mainstream understanding of time that is viewed as linear and striving towards an end goal to be met. It places the idea of gender transition within an easily understandable framework to mainstream audiences, both trans and non-trans, and is, therefore, more palatable to people who have never considered what it could mean to live a trans experience. While this palatability can erase the nuances of trans experiences, it is understandable that sometimes this is a necessary survival tactic – if a trans person can't present their experience in an understandable way, mainstream audiences are more likely to invalidate, erase, and direct violence at trans people.

That being said, Horak also counters that "individuals don't experience transition only according to hormone time. As Julian Carter (2013) argues, transition can involve complex temporal movements 'forward, backward, sideways, [and] tangential[ly]' all at the same time, a process he calls 'transitional time'." Transitional time recalls a more queer

understanding of transition. In other words, there is no endpoint or finish line, which differs from “hormone time”. Transitional time goes in all directions. It varies from person to person, and arguably, process is valued over a final or finished product. Transitional time is less easily understood by mainstream audiences because it does not follow a commonly held narrative of gender or transition - one that is binary, static, and prioritizes medical interventions. However, what transitional time does do is hold more space for a variety of trans experiences and allows for a broader range of emotions within it – not just “Now that I’m on hormones, I’m finally happy”, which, while that is not necessarily untrue, can reduce the meaning of trans and the experience of transition to a very simplistic narrative.

This is just one example of a way in which mainstream representational practices can serve to erase trans bodies and experiences in their complexity and variety. Theatre is, of course, not free from replicating the systems of power in our world, particularly because it is a medium in which we tell stories about people. Thus, those of us practicing trans self-representational practices in theatre - whether in explicitly enacting a trans narrative or simply just by existing publicly on stage - are often met with a question of: to speak the language of the mainstream or to not speak the language of the mainstream?

Much of the resistance I faced in *What You Will* came from cisgender audience members because I chose not to speak the language of mainstream intelligibility about a trans body and narrative. Therefore, I knew the minute I walked on stage the audience would misgender not only the character, but also me as an actor. And they did – throughout the run and in reviews. I did not bind, I did not lower my voice, I was not on hormones, and I chose to highlight a trans narrative - one that prioritized doubt and process - in a text that is entrenched in a modern production history of cisnormativity. Yet, the body the audience saw and the voice they heard is what I, as a trans person, live and speak in every day. And, I have felt doubt about my trans identity and continue to be in process around my gender. Through all of this, I am still trans masculine and non-binary, just as Cesario was still a trans man, despite the audience's inability to understand us. There were many people in the audience who, unless I explicitly said Cesario was a man and he’s trans, would never see it. Mainstream representational practices and culturally well-known stories don’t train them to

read trans or only train them to read trans in a very limited way. The responsibility put on me by the mainstream audience as a trans actor, then, presumably becomes about translating my or a trans character's own experience into a legible language for them. But that becomes this tough thing – because this is exactly the problem I face daily. They don't see - or even consider - the possibility of Cesario as a man (and by extension, me as a man) and rather, use various pieces of “evidence” to deny us our reality until we speak their language.

Furthermore, this denial of trans people existing on stage is not limited to their presence (or lack of presence) as characters in stories. As an actor, I've also frequently been in plays in which I am a cisgender man. In these instances, I never really doubt that people will believe my character is *being played* as a man, but I don't know that they are going to believe the character *is* a man. And it's not the people who are uncertain what my gender is as an actor that bother me because honestly, if they can't figure out what my gender is or choose not to assume anything, I'm more than okay with that - something is working then. Rather, it's that most people aren't even going to think twice about the fact that I, the actor, may not be a woman; that I may actually be a man (or nonbinary) like this character is, or when I occasionally play a cisgender woman that maybe the person beneath the character is not the same gender as the character. The audience becomes concerned with figuring out my “real gender” (i.e. my assigned gender at birth), and consequently, are trapped by a limited notion of what a man or woman or nonbinary person could look like. This is a replication of the same systems that work to misgender me when I walk down the street, or into a new place, or when people I know aren't able to gender me correctly. The stage is no exception. But, it's baffling that on stage we can all agree on my gender, but for some reason, as soon as I walk offstage, that agreeance disappears.

In theatre (as in other forms of art and media), the stories we tell naturalize - that is to say dictate what we assume to be natural - what is and isn't part of our social landscape. In the theatre zeitgeist, there are so few stories about trans people, or stories with trans narratives, or even trans bodies on stage. It has been a recurring phenomenon I have encountered since I've come out as a trans in the theatre world that I can make a choice on

stage that is particular to my lens as a trans person and inevitably the trans people in the audience see it and the cis people in the audience do not. In fact, I have often been impressed by how wholly unoriginal I am when I talk to other trans people who have spotted trans narratives in well-known stories long before I have or how terribly easy it seems for trans people to pick up on my trans body no matter what character I am playing. Yet, although, I have been astounded by the ability of people sitting next to each other in the audience to have such vastly different experiences of the same play, of the same body, of the same narrative on stage, how can it be a surprise anymore that when I walk across the stage as a trans actor, I am illegible, both in body and experience, to a mainstream audience?

So, what do we do when "...bodies are rendered meaningful only through some culturally and historically specific mode of grasping their physicality" (Stryker)? Do trans actors need to embody a mainstream understanding of trans in their self-representational practices on stage? For whom does it matter we do so? What do we lose when we translate a trans body and experience? What does it mean to create outside of a mainstream understanding of trans?

### **III. The Temporary Gender Adventures of Theatre, or self-determination and shifting**

*I stare at my computer screen. A comment on a Facebook photo I am tagged in stares back: "You make a really cute boy". I am 16 and I am playing another boy onstage. Offstage, I present very feminine - long hair, dresses, jewelry, make-up, the whole nine yards. All the things that I started to learn when I was 14 and my tomboy phase was abruptly over once I observed the older girls at my high school. What I know in this moment is I am a girl who likes to play boys. But, this comment sits with me. It shifts something internally because it resonates in a deeper way than "you're pretty" ever has. In the glow of the screen, I tumble back into the moment when I learned the definition of "androgynous". It is last fall and I am playing a puckish fairy in a Shakespeare play. We are learning about root words. "Androgynous": andro- man; gyn-: woman; both man and woman, or neither man nor woman. "Androgynous" - a word I say describes this character - becomes my new favorite word that I slip into my back pocket and keep with me. A second wave of puberty hits in*



*college. My hips start to grow. That offhand Facebook comment floats through me. That word I am holding carefully for myself nervously rustles in my back pocket. As I stare at my changing body in the mirror, my first thought is, "I won't be able to play boys anymore". I don't realize that's not the thought most other girls have when their bodies start to change. Until then, many people could agree on my boyishness on stage, or at least my gender ambiguity. With the impending realization that as a young woman I couldn't professionally play men for the rest of my life, some alarm bells started to go off in my body saying, "Hey, maybe being a woman is not something you have to keep playing at offstage".*

In the autobiographical book "Gender Failure", Rae Spoon writes, "More and more, I have thought of my gender as a story I tell myself." When actors tell stories on stage, they ask the audience to agree with them on the world of the story, much the same way we all ask people to agree with us on the story we tell ourselves about our genders. And, in theatre, as in everyday life, we run into issues if the givens of a story are not accepted by the audience (or the people around us). Spoon writes of romantic relationships, "There was always a vetting period when I wasn't sure if the person I was romantically involved with really believed the story I told about my gender. For a transgender person, the difference is that we often have to sell our stories to other people, instead of assuming that our bodies, presentation, and gender assignment will do that work for us." Gender, in cisnormative society, is viewed as a "given", that is to say an established fact or condition, in the stories we tell ourselves about our lives. But, often for gender non-conforming and trans people, our genders are not always fixed and instead they become stories that are told by other people when they don't "buy" our telling of our genders. We are told they are not easy to agree upon. We are told that the given(s) we inhabit are non-existent.

Ultimately, however, we should all be able to tell our own stories about gender. A central tenet of trans activism is the call for gender self-determination. According to Eric A. Stanley, "gender self-determination at its most basic suggests that we collectively work to create the most space for people to express whatever genders they choose at any given moment." In gender self-determination, "there are multiple ways to work one's gender and sexuality—and while they might have material differences, they must not be hierarchized in

the name of *realness*” (Stanley). In this way, it can be said that theatre actually acts as a practice of gender. We are all always constructing and expressing gender on stage, whether we are conscious of it or not. Because theatre is in its essence ephemeral, theatre functions as a space of what Spade calls "temporary gender adventures", or it could be said, the ability to tell and embody a gender story at any given time. When they create characters, actors, even cisgender actors who only perform characters of the gender they were assigned at birth, make choices about gender, even if it's acting in a way appropriate to gender normativity. In creating a character, actors abandon one form of passing (themselves) for multiple forms of passing as they enact different characters across times, spaces, bodies, personalities, and, of course, genders too. As such, even someone performing the same gender category again and again has an understanding that, for example, a woman is not a woman is not a woman. Just by engaging in the act of theatre, we are de-binarizing the notion of two fixed genders. Actors are, in many ways, always evoking a sense of "transing", if we are to understand "trans" as moving beyond, moving across, "to change in form or position" ("Trans-") and the act of transing as doing exactly these things. So, although theatre tends to be immensely gender normative even within the binary, part of acting, still, becomes the act of transing as well, not just by trans people, but any person constructing a gender of any kind on stage. Trans, therefore, becomes a unfixed notion - one of multiplicity, fluidity, and choice rather than a static, unchanging path to arrive at an endpoint.

However, while these gender stories may be a given for cisgender and gender normative people, as trans and gender non-conforming folks, we constantly have to fight for others to agree that our gender stories even exist. So, when even that is denied, what is a trans actor - who is supposed to be vulnerable in front of and share a story with the audience - left with? In "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage", Susan Stryker theorizes trans as monstrous, a term often evoked to describe transgender people. In doing so, she calls attention to the artificiality of monsters, who are ultimately constructed by the people who term others as such. She connects this to the way in which trans identity is also artificial. She argues that because trans identity (and all gender identity) is artificial - that is to say constructed by people - it is

a more powerful position to occupy than someone who assumes their gender identity is natural. By claiming one's artificiality, one has the possibility to create in a more nuanced way because nothing is dictated as a fixed condition. As stated above, in theatre, we all construct artificial gender stage. It's in the very nature of creating a character. But, for trans actors in particular, we already hold a larger vocabulary and map to navigate these temporary gender adventures in a way gender normative, cisgender actors likely have not had to reflect on and observe as extensively. As trans and gender non-conforming people claiming our constructedness, we can assert more agency over this creation of a character (and also our own genders). Actors who assume their gender is natural, even in knowing the character they construct is artificial, can't see that the identity (the "character", the "story" of themselves, if you will) they possess is just as constructed. Likely because, more often than not, at the end of the play, they return to their personal gender, which is the same as their character's. There is an assumption by cissexist, mainstream audiences that at the end of the play, I too will return to the gender I was assigned at birth, the one they try to read on my body. But, the perceived "trick" I, as a trans actor, enact is not that under it all, I will rightfully resume my embodiment as a woman. The "trick", that is to say the threat of my existence on stage, is that underneath the character, I demonstrate that the gender of the actor, the actual gender I embody, is just as constructed as the character I create. And consequently, so is everyone else's. As Stryker poetically points out:

Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts, I who achieve the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish

as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself. (Stryker)

When on stage, trans actors, like all actors, live in the "spaces of overlap, ambiguity, and ambivalence gliding, sliding and interpenetrating around a whirling, changing, transforming body" (Bay-Cheng and Sennett), but these spaces of non-fixedness tend to be more immediately obvious on trans bodies, as Stryker points out above. Our bodies directly disrupt the idea that there is a "fixed body that exists underneath performance" (Bay-Cheng and Sennett). So, this visibility of gender construction on our bodies places trans actors in a position to continue destabilizing gendered theatre spaces essentially by showing up and embodying their gender stories. In "Body Shame, Body Pride: Lessons from the Disability Rights Movement", Eli Clare states, "Personally I'd like to completely discard the idea of normality. I don't mean that everyone ought to be queer; it's just that the very idea of normal means comparing ourselves to some external, and largely mythical, standard". This quote recalls "Mutilating Gender" in which Spade writes, "A preppy, clean cut look is often suggested for passing. Again, this establishes the requirement of being even more 'normal' than 'normal people' when it comes to gender presentation, and discouraging of gender disruptive behavior." In "Body Shame, Body Pride", one of Clare's focuses is on a "politics of self-determination" from the disability rights movement, which resonates largely with gender self-determination. Self-determination disrupts the notions of the "right" way to do gender. In this regard, this notion can be the politics for gender disruptive behavior that Spade calls for and serves to combat the requirement of "normal" for trans folks, and beyond that gender normativity on stage. Thus, while trans people are particularly required to play into normative gender behavior, being in the space of theatre, where on stage we all create our characters' genders, is de-binarizing in its own right. Furthermore, self-determination gives people the agency to determine how we understand our gender in our own context. It places us in the position of being experts on our own bodies and identities in multiple aspects of our lives – not just through a lens of medicine, the law, or mainstream audience members.

Theatre can serve as a potentially liberating space of trans self-representation by engaging in the act of transing through character (and narrative) creation and in doing so,

exposing the construction of gender more widely, which reflects the practice of gender self-determination. Yet while the representational practices performed by actors can function as gender self-determination and the de-binarizing of gender on stage, this still frequently does not translate into a recognition and acknowledgment of trans bodies and narratives by the audience. But should we as trans actors even strive for recognition and acknowledgement? How do we resist the static categorization that gender self-determination seeks to dismantle? In "Shifting Futures: Digital Trans of Color Praxis", micha cárdenas offers a frame through which to view this resistance. Quoting Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Lisa Nakamura, cárdenas theorizes "the possibilities of race [another visual marker of difference] as code" (cárdenas 6). She suggests that code - a seemingly binary function - is actually not so binary, but rather, is defined by the moment(s) of shift between the 0 and 1. If we are to view binary code as various visual markers of difference we possess and their normative counterparts - from race to gender to ability to sexuality - this space between suggests infinite possibility for choice on the part of marginalized actors, not just a binary of visibility and invisibility dictated by those with power.

A key to these choices in terms of actors on stage can be found in cárdenas' discussion of shifting. Shifting is a tool used by people of marginalized identities to modulate between being visible and invisible in their identities. Of shifting, cárdenas asserts, "What is important here, though, is not the states before or after the flicker, but the ability to modulate visibility. Modulating visibility, which may include changing one's form, location or appearance, may be called shifting". This movement "...from invisible to highly visible and back, is a necessary skill in an environment that seeks to control one's visibility for you" (cárdenas). And indeed, in the space of theatre, where I stand on a public stage and let strangers assess my body, I modulate my identity as a trans actor - not just on stage, but from the moment I audition for a play or join a project with new collaborators. I assess how I should present myself to make the most impact artistically as an actor (and for safety as a person). I look at my movement options from trans man to queer man to gay man to man to trans masculine to non binary to gender non conforming to assigned female at birth. This is a game I play with my marginalized identities (and how they are read on my body) not only in

the space of theatre, but in my daily life - which do I use today to navigate the world? What do I need to move into today to exist? In addition to being a space of gender self-determination then, theatre is also a space of modulating visibility and invisibility and doing so quickly. Furthermore, if we resist theatre as an act of recognition through a narrow mainstream lens or a fixed identity, ultimately shifting - like theatre - is still relational - that is determined by the space between the actor and audience. Beyond a survival tactic, shifting in theatre can be an artistic choice for how to craft this relationship to an audience on the actor's terms.

That being said, the way gender self-determination and shifting are practiced in theatre would, of course, vary widely depending on the form(s) of theatre people perform. Therefore, how can trans actors effectively utilize these aspects of gender self-determination and shifting present within theatre, when theatre almost always replicates the systems of power that seek to erase trans people? As trans actors, when and how do we choose to engage (or not) with these systems? Why resist recognition?

#### **IV. Trans Embodiment and Trans Affect, or the freedom to create**

*I am in "In the Next Room" - or the very binary play. I play Leo Irving, a very obviously cis man. Yet, somehow, within this intensely binary world of the Victorian U.S., I find when I look at my own body and experience, they still destabilize gender. It's the Trans Experience The Audience Does Not See, or what I like to call the Wonderful Perverseness of Playing Leo Irving.*

*-I am "a gentleman" and a "man with hysteria" in the theatre upstairs, but in the basement, I use the women's bathroom because I'm too afraid to use the men's.*

*-On stage, I am baffled by having my period and acting as if I am having a prostate orgasm at the same time.*

*-On stage, I speak lines about my fear of being repulsed by hair outside of a vagina. Then, I walk offstage and talk about my own vagina with members of the cast.*

*-For the women, "Time to get into corsets" during rehearsals also implies me because while the cis men put on their suit jackets, I also have to put on my binder.*

*-It is surreal to embody Leo's presumption that he can take up space as much space as he does and women will fall in love with him, because when I presented femininely, I've been on the receiving end of people (always men) presuming I will reciprocate feelings for them more than once.*

*-I walk out of the men's dressing room, drop off my binder to be washed, and then hear "She dropped her socks" on my way out.*

*-I, the actor, am called "he", "she", and "they" during the same 5-minute quick change.*

*In the period of the play, sexual inversion - that is having desires of the opposite sex within you - was how homosexuality was understood. I'm pretty sure Leo might be considered a homosexual in these times, even if the case is that he would fall in love with whatever beautiful creature crossed his path. And I'm pretty sure doctors at the time would have called me a sexual invert. I laugh because I hope Krafft-Ebing with his "Psychopathia Sexualis" is rolling in his grave at this non-binary trans masculine queer playing a cisgender man in the Victorian U.S. who may have a few non-normative sexual behaviors.*

In his article, "Transgender without Organs? Mobilizing a Geo-Affective Theory of Gender Modification", Lucas Crawford asks, "What kind of phenomenon is 'transgender' if it exists without hormones, surgery, or the extensive medical documentation that accompanies these identifiably trans procedures?" He argues for the "imperceptibility" of trans people living in rural communities as a catalyst to disrupt current (urban) transgender understandings. Crawford challenges the notion that "passing, nightlife, community, and transition" are the pinnacle of trans legibility. Crawford uses rural trans life to accentuate this argument with the idea that rural trans folks can't know how they are perceived in rural areas because they have often grown up in these places. As such, these experiences highlight the ways in which trans exists outside of body modification in order to push our understanding of transgender further. He writes of a "gender nomadism" defined by the acts "of refusing home, of refusing the straightest and quickest path between two points". Crawford theorizes transgender not only as existing through visibility, recognition, and medicine, but in trans affect and trans embodiment as well. Of trans affect he writes, "As Bonta and Protevi note in Deleuze and Geophilosophy, affect is 'the capacity to become'

(2004, 50), whereas feeling is the reterritorialization of becoming, by means of coding and ultimately controlling it.” Thus, if trans affect is the "capacity to become", then trans embodiment is the becoming through material means - the body in space, in relation to other bodies.

Gender nomadism, restlessness in gender, affect, and embodiment resonates deeply with my experience as a trans actor on stage. I am frequently a gender nomad when I act. Acting is essentially affect, in that it is constantly being open to the capacity to become - that is to say, being present as well as ready to receive and make choices. As an actor, I constantly look at affect that is the character's and the actor's, and negotiate that distinction (and whether there is one). I travel from one gender to the next as I move between plays. Like Horak says of transitional time, there is no linear progression to my gender embodiment on stage. I've been girls, boys, men, women, people who are likely non-binary, cis, trans, queer, even a non-human fairy more than once. When I act, my own gender becomes completely unfixed – and as such – totally unseen (in a way) by the audience. They simultaneously see the character's gender and ignore my gender in the space of the theatre. So, as a trans actor, I abandon always embodying my personal gender identity in favor of existing in the capacity to become - or potentially embodying multiple not just genders, but various identities across and outside binaries at any given time. Additionally, I exist across genders without surgery, hormones, or medical documentation. As an actor, I existed across genders before I even knew I was trans. Theatre never taught me the politics of my identity, but it did teach me some of the possibilities of becoming and the embodiment of those possibilities. Thus, trans affect and trans embodiment on stage, rather than only explicit trans identity (which is often denied anyway), can be a means of denaturalizing gender, resisting categorization, and holding space for multiplicity.

Since trans identity is denied a position in theatre (and most spaces) and to fight for recognition is potentially not the most liberating choice, how do we tell trans stories that don't reduce us to politics, but allow us possibility, emotionality, and life? This isn't to deny that politics very nearly influence every aspect of trans livelihood and life chances or to depoliticize trans identity, but to ask what would it look like to just give trans people a space



to exist through our breath, imagination, and bodies? The politics of trans identity on stage often translates to just putting more trans people on stage, which, sure let's do. But, why are we waiting for the goodwill of systems that deny our humanity to *just* include us? Through trans affect and trans embodiment we can claim the space of our possibility within and without those systems. Trans affect is the transitional moment before a choice - and therefore one of possibility - and trans embodiment is action and creation.

Thus, in a space where we as trans actors are often invisible, imperceptibility along with *cárdenas'* shifting can be disruptive forces. Imperceptibility challenges the notion of how to properly express gender. Shifting challenges the notion of fixing an identity to the point that possibility is lost. By never knowing exactly what the gender of the actor under the character is, they both challenge standards of categorization we use for each other. Additionally, the stage is gender disruptive precisely because of the possibility to be a gender nomad. Even in the assumption that I am going to go back to my assigned sex at the end of a play, this disruption is uninterrupted. If I play a cis person, gender remains unfixed because my transness don't match up with the gender identity of the character. If I identify and enact a trans narrative - that is to say a narrative that resonates with trans affect and embodiment but does not explicitly use trans identity - trans people exist defiantly even in spaces a cissexist lens may not see it. If I play a trans character, we can maybe even start to ponder the construction of gender more explicitly. And if the audience even considers that I, the actor, am trans in all of it, maybe they start to consider that the stories trans people tell about their bodies and experiences exist. But, we don't have time to wait for those people to catch up. So regardless, when trans actors walk across the stage, there are multiple levels of gender fuckery happening.

All this said, the pursuit of possibility and creation becomes an issue when it becomes a pursuit at the expense of others less privileged. When possibilities and creation become an excuse for ignorance, then we lose their transformative potential. For example, in the commercial sector of theatre (which is where actors usually get paid for their work), I can get by so long as I perform a particular, legible-to-the-mainstream gender – one that is white, attractive, able bodied, (exclusively) masculine, passing for cis as much as I possibly can, and

non-queer. This is a body that is viewed as valuable on the basis of the profit it can bring. As long as I can do that, I can integrate myself into the commercial sector because my body is seen as easily readable and therefore, profitable. I essentially participate in the “diversity as good practice” and “trans subjects as highly productive” model by placing the acceptable version of my trans body in the white-collar theatre world (Raha). Never mind that, I am usually erasing any of my queerness and non-binary embodiment; and never mind that, often my very privileged body is still considered unreadable / confusing to a large portion of mainstream theatre audiences. It is a dangerous and easy cycle to fall into if one is not critically engaging with and understanding the consequences of the system in which one is participating. Yet while theatre, and many institutions, are reserved for the benefit of the very privileged, we can leverage possibility and creation to flourish within and without these institutions.

Consequently, a conceptualization of freedom in regards to these choices is helpful. Although Elizabeth Grosz has a known history of trans exclusionary feminism, we can claim her work here to imagine a freedom characterized by choice. In her article "Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom", Grosz utilizes the philosophy of Henri Bergson to re-conceptualize our notion of freedom. She writes, "I believe that Bergson may help us to articulate an understanding of subjectivity, agency, and freedom that is more consonant with a feminism of difference than with an egalitarian feminism, which more clearly finds its support in various projects centered around the struggles for rights and recognition." This is indeed consonant with the notion that we can't wait for systems to recognize us, as Grosz articulates, "Freedom is not accomplished through the grace or good will of the other but is attained only through the struggle with matter, the struggle of bodies to become more than they are". Grosz argues freedom is not an independent or inherent quality we all possess, but rather a "...freedom of action that is above all connected to an active self, an embodied being, a being who acts in a world of other beings and objects". It is a resistance against habit, routine, and normalization. It's a resistance against systemization of what is deemed natural, normal, and possible. A "...concept of freedom that links it not to choice but to innovation and invention." And indeed, many trans scholars and activists such as Reina Gossett, Aren

Aizura, Dean Spade, Nat Raha, Lucas Crawford, Eric A. Stanley, and many others (from both within transgender studies and in other academic fields of marginalized groups) have already problematized the fight for visibility and recognition by systems, such as the state and medical institutions, that perpetuate and administer violence against us, particularly against the most marginalized amongst us. But, being a "nobody" in the eyes of the state - or even simply being imperceptible and shifting in front of the audiences one performs for - ultimately leaves us more freedom to exist (Aizura). And, ultimately, transgender is the freedom to create. In the freedom to embody trans on one's own terms, no matter in what space that embodiment takes place, no matter who picks up on that act or not, is an act of material, tangible freedom within the myriad of overlapping systems that seek to delimit and disembody us. We can use imagination and creation as means to resist dehumanization and the cooptation of our bodies for profit. As Grosz writes, "It is rare that our actions express with such intimate intensity the uniqueness of our situation and our position within it."<sup>15</sup> But it is at these moments that freedom at its most intense is expressed."

## **V. Towards a Flickering Trans Theatre**

So, what is the function of a trans body and experience on stage beyond existing to fulfill a diversity quotient? The trans body - and other bodies marked as different - on stage actively subvert gender and other binary categorizations as a fixed options by making the seemingly solid edges of these categories blurry. So, what does a person seen as existing in space of impossibility do? Through existing in these spaces comes expansion, which in turns shows the cracks in the inclusion that theatre claims. Ultimately, it comes down to finding and fighting for the agency to create, not just choose from limited options, in the face of systems that want to deny us choice to begin with. It is finding the agency to engage with the system or not, to protect our transness, to misbehave, to shout loudly, to shock, to refuse to speak, to speak an alternative language in plain sight of the mainstream without them realizing, etc., etc. etc. In essence, theatre is trans because in theatre we participate in a cycle of creating, which is a space of turning our impossible imaginations into embodied possibility. Therefore, I propose:

- The audience's simultaneous inability to read trans bodies on stage and ability to instantaneously accept a character's gender is a product of their cissexist lens (as placed by the cissexist systems in which we live).
- The temporary gender adventures of theatre (that is to say the way in which we construct a character's gender in every role we play) allow trans people (and non-trans people) to expose the construction and fluidity of gender.
- Trans bodies being in roles and spaces "they shouldn't be in" is non-binarizing and provides other options of existing through embodiment in these characters, narratives, and spaces. To borrow from Jasbir Puar, the proliferation of, in this case, gender, can serve to make binaries "fade through of the overwhelming force of multiplicity" because so many possibilities exist in the movement *between* two fixed options. This can be accessed through the notion of shifting, that is modulating one's visibility or invisibility, in which the movement, not a fixed state, is the moment of agency (cárdenas).
- The stage is a potentially liberating space for trans people and potentially disruptive force of gender. Through a practice of trans affect and trans embodiment, we can find this liberation and disruption through a freedom to create.
- Creation can be resistance within and without systems that deem you impossible. As Grosz articulates, "It is only after a work of art, a concept, formula, or act exists, is real, and has had some some actuality that we can say it must have been possible, that it was one of the available options. Its possibility can be gleaned only from its actuality". The act of creation brings an impossible notion into the possible, just as trans people do in embodying their genders.

As a trans actor, something I am really good at is imagining myself into stories trans people aren't explicitly in. Because I rarely saw explicitly trans people in stories growing up (and still often don't), I became very good at finding the metaphor and journey of stories - of recognizing my experience in the unspoken core of a story, of imagining parts of myself into these worlds through other bodies. Many of my past projects as an actor-theatre maker have been embodied research of these propositions.

At the end of the day, *What You Will* was never about and profoundly about Cesario being a trans man. That is to say, it wasn't about me claiming a label for Cesario's gender identity. It was more about how his journey responded to something deeply personal in myself as a trans person. It was about how I recognized Cesario's emotional states and pulled at those threads. It was about lines like "Time thou must untangle this, not I. It is too hard a knot for me to untie" and "For such as we are made of, such we be" and "I am the man, if it be so" and "I am all the brothers of my father's house and all the daughters too". It was about having the empathy to own my emotional truth. And trans people were much better at this practice than the cis people in the audience were.

Transness is not just visibility and embodiment as dictated by medical-legal systems and cisnormativity. My trans theatre seeks to present transness through trans embodiment and trans affect on *our* terms. It's about going beyond born in the wrong body narratives and fixed notions of identity. It's about trans characters and trans narratives created outside of cisgender notions of what it means to be trans. It's about righteous vulnerability - that is choosing to share emotional truth in spaces we create as safe. It's about being responsive to the visceral and immediate self. It's about having the empathy to see ourselves and to see each other. It's external. It's about the relationality, the process, the imaginative, the instability, the possibility in the impossibility of being trans, and embracing all of these. And indeed, trans theatre lives in the active verb to trans, rather than being settled in a noun-as-identifier.

But how does that happen? What is the "doing" of trans theatre? I'm not sure yet. And besides, there is no definitive trans body or experience so there can never be a definitive trans theatre. Right now, this trans theatre manifesto must necessarily be a living document. In the tradition of avant-garde theatre practitioners and Crawford's notions of transing-as-movement, this manifesto must keep changing, moving, shifting, and be based in praxis in order to be alive, surprising, and responsive. I must remain open to possibility.

So, in this moment, we ultimately have nothing to prove, only to share with those who show up with us.

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